DEFINITION OF A FARMER

JESSICA MORGAN

GEOFFREY FARMER IS AN ENEMY OF THE MUSEUM. Fundamental questions that are at the heart of an art institution's focus on the caretaking of art—Where does the work begin and end? Exactly what is "the work," and how can it be archived and documented?—are confounded by Farmer's practice. Each installation of a particular piece by Farmer involves more often than not a process of alteration, addition and adaptation that departs from its previous iteration, and this transformation frequently continues during the public run of the exhibition itself, such that the work presented at the outset of the show has little or no resemblance to its manifestation at the end. Compounding this confusion concerning the boundaries of the piece is the fact that Farmer's installations can consist of hundreds of elements, many of which are highly ephemeral and remain in a state of flux. Curator, registrar and conservator are all frustrated, it seems, in their attempts to define, catalogue and maintain the work.

Not that Farmer's work is in any sense a mechanical reaction to the prescriptions of the institution and its desire for order and delineated parameters. While he may take some pleasure in challenging the conventions of museum practice, Farmer's "difficulties" (from the museum's perspective) stem in fact from his complex and many-layered approach to art-making, not from an adolescent desire to disobey. Contained within his practice are elements of story-telling, process-based sculpture, conceptual action, performance, social sculpture and the influence of the film industry, as well as the theatrical tropes of a variety of other staged events and current or historical forms of display or spectacle. The art historical and the cultural, the literary and the museological, the present and the past are presented side by side, although not in the manner of a flattening, ahistorical simulacrum but rather as an elaborately devised series of relationships that Farmer has conceived in an attempt to convey the complexity and breadth of the associations he brings to a piece. The links between these moments, ideas, spaces or narratives are rarely concerned with formal similarities but instead with establishing a conceptual path along which the artist is able to point to the possibilities contained within a potentially encyclopedic range of reference. Farmer's allusions, mini-narratives, citations and mimicry reveal and humorously take apart the self-reflexive nature of art from the last few decades while simultaneously suggesting a variety of other possible contexts for association.

Comparisons can be made with the practices of a variety of other artists, whose influence is reflected in Farmer's work as both sincere emulation and fond ridicule. The accumulative rigour of Dieter Roth's art comes to mind, where the detritus of human existence is amassed and ordered in a Sisyphean attempt to make sense of the chaos of the world. Or the process-based sculpture of Robert Morris, whose famously self-reflexive actions in works such as *Continuous Project Altered Daily* question the limitations of the static art object. Also recalled in Farmer's installations are the hilarious and astutely critical works of Eleanor Antin, whose theatrical, invented personas and photo/text documentary pieces disassemble the construction of identity. Joan Jonas makes an appearance in Farmer's frequent use of this artist's tropes of ritualized gesture and symbolic object, as well as his employment of

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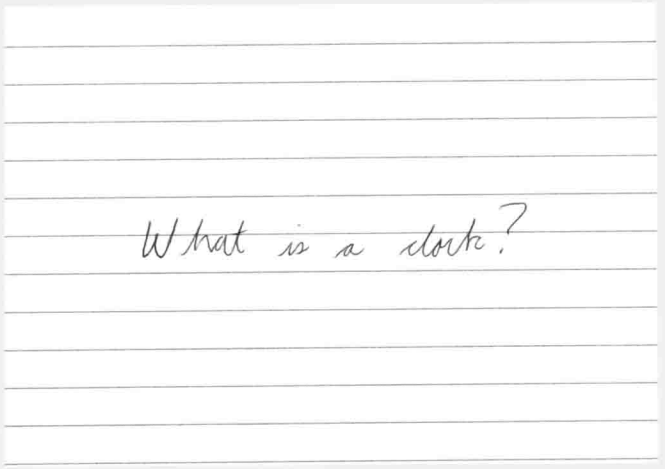
video performance documentation. Despite formal disparities, one could also cite the presence of Michael Asher in Farmer's decisively aimed institutional critique. Interestingly, while these artists are felt as an academic influence that has clearly been absorbed in Farmer's informed relationship to recent art history, there is also a sense in which they feature in some of Farmer's work as personas or attitudes, their work or operations taking on the status of a character within Farmer's elaborate sets. The alternating proximity to and parody of their work is typical of Farmer's ultimately highly performative relationship to objects and art. He takes on the working method of a particular artist (as opposed to the artist's persona) but in so doing simultaneously reduces it to a "part to be played"—a definable role it is therefore no longer possible to inhabit entirely in earnest—and makes it a historically significant gesture without which his own practice could not exist.

This interest in staging and role-play in Farmer's work extends well beyond his relationship to artistic forebears and has frequently been traced to his exposure to the film industry, whose presence is felt daily in the artist's hometown of Vancouver. The entire city of Vancouver can actually be read as a giant stage set, used as it is as a stand-in for a variety of US cities in numerous film and television productions. Farmer is of course not alone in having absorbed this dimension into his work, and such Vancouver-based artists as Stan Douglas, Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham have no doubt also influenced his interest in the presence of a production set in the immediate surroundings. While much of these artists' work has remained in the media of the industry itself (still photography and moving image), Farmer's work differs dramatically in its concern with three-dimensional form – a sculptural and theatrical approach that suggests the action of the set itself rather than the finished product. Many of Farmer's works have taken on the form of props, and his larger installations are staged in a manner (similarly drawn out over time) that invites comparison with the duration and process of a film shoot. Farmer himself appears in various roles throughout the production, alternately taking on the parts of director, actor, prop, cameraman and set designer.

Trailer (2002) appears at first sight to be the type of transport container used on film sets to hold the various costumes, objects and pieces of equipment required for production outside the studio. However, closer inspection reveals that it is merely a fabricated ghost of a trailer, an enormous prop manufactured, perhaps, for a moment of movie industry self-reflection. Or perhaps the scale of the prop/trailer implies the staged and fabricated nature of everything that surrounds us, which makes us all actors in the *Truman Show*-style movie that is everyday life. But if so, Farmer's work is by no means an entirely negative vision of this staging of the world. Far from offering a flimsy, superficial façade, Farmer's props are rarely limited to a surface reading; instead, they require that every form and image be re-examined for the narrative or information it may contain. Things are not as they seem to be, but nor are they simply a hollow shell of vacuous twenty-first century artificiality. Rather, Farmer's elaborate scenarios suggest there is a social life to objects and surroundings.



And Finally the Street Becomes the Main Character (Clock), 2005- . Installation detail

And Finally the Street Becomes the Main Character (Clock) (2005-) casts the objects of an urban alleyway (rubbish bin, discarded tin can, and so forth)—in both abstract and real form—as the characters in a sound piece. The work is set on a low platform, evoking theatre-in-the-round (or, indeed, a Morris-like platform-sculpture), allowing the audience to move around the

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piece as the "action" evolves. There is a speaker embedded in each prop/actor on the stage, and a soundtrack (with compositions for each "character") plays the complete ensemble over the course of twenty-four hours. On the wall adjacent to the work is the score, or script, where a timeline and titles indicate when the various elements will play. An excerpt from the score reads as follows:

7 am – 7:10 am
A creak, the creaking creak, a nobody sound, outside maybe a bus?
7:20 am – 8 am
We awake together in sequence, we begin in unity, let us rise and work! (performed and recorded in Cypress Provincial Park, British Columbia)
8:10 am – 8:11 am
In the distance, from a dark corner becoming brighter louder, then diminishing and disappearing
8:11 am – 8:11:47 am
Birds in Crater
8:15 am – 8: 20 am
That sad walk, to work (percussion)
8: 20 am – 8: 30 am
The mathematical truth of time.

Coming upon the work at any moment, viewers can participate in the twenty-four hour production, a day in the life of an alleyway—the mundane starting-point that Farmer expands exponentially through the identification of and allusion to sound and concept in the accompanying script.

Though Farmer does not physically activate the props in *And Finally the Street Becomes the Main Character (Clock)* (the title of the work actually suggests that it is an endeavour to remove the actors and events of film and to focus instead on the normally overlooked location background), their activation through sound (recorded noise of the objects) and suggestion recalls the work of Mike Kelley, for whom the use of props in performance and sculpture is structured so as to imply different forms of engagement: background, contextualization, active participant and so forth. The props develop characters, animating form and loaded association through their use and activity within a given work. Like Kelley, Farmer has incorporated an interest in politics, social history and psychology into his work through a similar, resolutely object-based practice with a performative emphasis. The manifestation of these concerns is rarely explicit, however, invoking instead our associative relationship to cultural and aesthetic form and language.

In Farmer's work the fluctuation between animate and inanimate, active and passive, real and artificial has implications for the viewer. In his installations—and especially in his larger exhibitions, where a more elaborate *mise en scène* can be developed—people are led through a series of encounters that manipulate their position in relation to the work, making them alternately participant or viewer, observer or observed. This effect is suggested quite literally by the frequent presence in Farmer's works of disembodied eyes and masks with eyeholes, and by the use of locational devices to establish viewpoint or perspective. For his exhibition at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal Farmer introduces this fluctuating position at the outset of the visitor's experience. Heading towards the exhibition space down a long corridor, the viewer may notice that one of the three large white pillars that run along the central pathway is slightly out of alignment with the other two. Closer examination reveals that this pillar has two eyeholes facing the oncoming visitor. Once on the other side of the pillar, it becomes apparent that it is not complete but forms an empty half-circle, and that the viewer can actually stand within the hollow space and look through the eyeholes at the arriving public. An uneasy consciousness of one's own recent position as the object of this gaze morphs into the prospect of occupying the position of observer, secretly viewing the next victims of Farmer's ruse. This perspectival shift seems less concerned with notions of power and control, however, than with the spectator's experience of the elision of meaning embodied in the sliding positions of subjectivity suggested by the work. Just as we are asked in *And Finally the Street Becomes the Main Character (Clock)* to imagine the attitude and outlook of objects abandoned on the street, Farmer here encourages us to adopt the

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fairly ridiculous position of hiding inside the pillar, calling to mind those childhood games in which the main attraction is the expectation of discovery and exposure rather than the successful act of hiding. Looking/being looked at, knowing/not knowing—such binaries are never allowed to rest in Farmer's work, where the viewer's position and that of the artist remain equally ambiguous.

The extent to which this uncertainty pervades our relationship to the world of knowledge, objects and thought is further examined in *The Last Two Million Years* (2007), for which Farmer takes on the modest task of revisiting human history. The origin of this idea was Farmer's discovery of an encyclopedia of the same title, published by Reader's Digest, that aims to map the development of the world and the emergence of civilization. No doubt the scope of the undertaking appealed to Farmer's sense of humour, and he set about reducing the book to its images—a vast array of historical recreations, inventions, artworks, archaeological discoveries and significant people that he cut out exactingly from the book's pages. Farmer then produced an elaborate three-dimensional model of the earth's history by propping up the culled figures and forms vertically on a series of supporting pedestals. Entering the gallery, viewers can first examine some of the smallest scenes, placed like a tiny frieze on top of a sheet of plasterboard. A line of figures, objects and forms marches precariously along the top of the abutted vertical sheets, leading spectators towards the gradually more substantial terrain formed by the surface area of conventional pedestals. Farmer's recreation allows for a mix of geographic location, cultural tradition, historical event and evolutionary change, all united through a similarity of form (paper cut-outs of a certain size). Following the meandering line established by the positioning of the pedestals, the viewer is encouraged to "read" the story of the world, re-ordered and condensed in a way that makes apparent the impossibility of total comprehension. This room-sized installation radically reduces the vast expanse of history while simultaneously, through its abstract, non-chronological presentation, suggesting the endless permutations of material and philosophical developmental trajectories. The impossibility of settling on one history, one methodology for the ordering of our knowledge of the world becomes blatantly evident, and the juxtapositions of time and place suggest an imaginative nonconformity to the dominant modes of understanding.

Though *The Last Two Million Years* is the most explicit example, much of Farmer's work investigates the potential for different orders and perspectives of thought and understanding. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the artist has spoken of his interest in works such as early twentieth-century art historian Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas*, an unfinished project in which the author sought to suggest connections between the art and artefacts of many different societies (east and west, north and south, emerging and developed) and ages (ancient and modern), as well as images and ephemera relating to a variety of disciplines. A radical nonconformism lies at the heart of Farmer's approach, and it is understandable that institutions founded on doctrine, methodology and a desire for certainty should be challenged by such an attitude. Ultimately, the real test for the institution lies not in the material expansiveness of Farmer's projects, mentioned at the outset, but rather in his fundamental questioning of the ideological framework that requires not only the production of definable objects and works but a conceptual approach that complies with a singular understanding of how the world is to be ordered. Now that Farmer has completed a reinterpretation of human knowledge, perhaps the more modest task of re-conceiving the museum will follow.

JESSICA MORGAN is Curator, Contemporary Art, at Tate Modern. She has organized group exhibitions such as *Common Wealth* (2003) *Time Zones* (2004) *Martin Kippenberger* (2006) and *The World as a Stage* (2007) at Tate Modern. She has curated a series of solo exhibitions of international emerging artists including Meschac Gaba, Jan De Cock, Roman Ondàk, Catherine Sullivan, Simryn Gill and Brian Jungen (2005-2006), as well as the 2006-2007 Unilever commission, *Test Site* by Carsten Höller. Morgan is currently curating the first UK retrospective of the work of John Baldessari, to be shown at Tate Modern in 2009.

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